

BYOD

An Opportunity Schools Cannot Afford to Miss

by Dawn Nelson

While walking into Park Center Senior High School recently, I passed three girls. One was jumping off a bench and the others were trying to capture her action on camera. After watching them fully engaged and enjoying their creativity, I walked over to ask them what they were doing. Their response was that they were taking pictures for photography class. I continued the conversation working toward my actual goal—to learn about the devices they were using. One showed me a camera from the class and the other held up her phone, telling me that they were able to use their phones in school, so she was using hers to take photos for class. That is one small example of the power of BYOD.



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BYOD or BYOT—it doesn't matter what people call the concept of students bringing their own devices to school; nearly everyone has strong opinions about it. Online opinions range from Eric Sheninger's "BYOT: An Idea Whose Time Has Come" to Gary Stager's "BYOD—Worst Idea of the 21st Century?" And that range can be found in almost every conversation about it.

What is BYOD? Wikipedia describes it simply as a "business policy of employees bringing personally owned mobile devices to their place of work ..." and it is something that both business and education are dealing with at this time. An internet search for BYOT, or Bring Your Own Technology, returns more results related to education. But behind the simple words stands a world of opportunity for students and learning.

RATIONALES: COSTS ... AND BENEFITS!

There are many reasons that schools decide to move toward BYOD. The primary reason whenever anyone begins the discussion is cost. True 1:1 programs in which the school provides a continual stream of technology for every student can simply be unsustainable and unmanageable. Another cost incentive that is mentioned is that it takes pressure off the tech support structure as students are responsible for their own devices. But schools that begin the journey soon find that the monetary reason becomes a minor factor as the impact on learning becomes evident.

PROJECT COPERNICUS

Project Copernicus, a BYOD initiative in Osseo Area Schools, a suburban Minneapolis school system with about 21,000 students in 25 schools, began in August 2009 at three sites—a high school and two elementary schools. As it was a voluntary program for teachers, the only thing the same across the schools was the concept. At Osseo Senior High School, three science teachers decided to participate. At Weaver Lake Elementary, a STEM school, two teachers participated, and Woodland Elementary had a team of nine fifth- and sixth-grade teachers. The school district supported the project by putting in wireless access points, offering three devices per classroom, and holding some initial training. Because of the foundational concept of the project's voluntary aspect, each school was given the choice of devices to allow and ways to implement the project. At the high school, the teachers selected netbooks for support and allowed all devices, including cellphones. At Weaver Lake, they selected iPod touches as their devices and allowed all devices. At Woodland,

they selected netbooks and only allowed students to bring in laptops or netbooks. It was a small start, but it was a start.

Since then the project has grown. Two more teachers began in the spring, and in the fall of 2010, there were 45 people from five more schools at the training. Here's the most compelling of the stories shared when the teams were asked why they were there: The junior high principal said that a student had come to him, explained how he was using his device for learning, and asked if he was going to be able to continue to have that opportunity. It has continued to grow, and now, all but four of the elementary schools allow student devices to some extent. Participation ranges from one or two teachers who allow them in their classrooms to the entire site allowing students access to their devices throughout the day.

SUPPORT AND PLANNING

There has been careful planning with an infrastructure and resources to support the classrooms. A public wireless network that allows access without a password to all learning spaces was installed in the summer between Year 1 and Year 2. Although a CIPA (Children's Internet Protection Act) compliant filter is in place, nothing is blocked, so teachers and students alike have access to YouTube and Web 2.0 applications for collaboration and creativity. Google Apps for Education was implemented in the fall of 2009 and is an essential tool in nearly every classroom using student devices. Moodle and Edmodo are also supported by the district.

The program began with some basic principles. The first ones are administrative support and communication with parents. CTO Tim Wilson established the communication with principals, assuring them that any classrooms and teachers would have support as needed and that any disciplinary issues would be handled by the school with district support. Teachers who were interested in the project were assured the same support and then directed to sample letters for parent communication.

IMPACT

The reports have been exciting. Although the first basic uses are often calculators, searches for information, or classroom response tools, there are other reports that show the power of this project. At Osseo schools, for example, the following occurred:

- A sixth-grade student reported that she could learn any time, any place.

- A fifth-grade student writing with Storybird reported that for the first time he believed he could write.
- Students leave messages on Google Voice for world language classes.
- A science teacher posts homework assignments and help on Facebook.
- A football captain made a worldwide impact on Twitter: www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6-xNEtgYFQ.

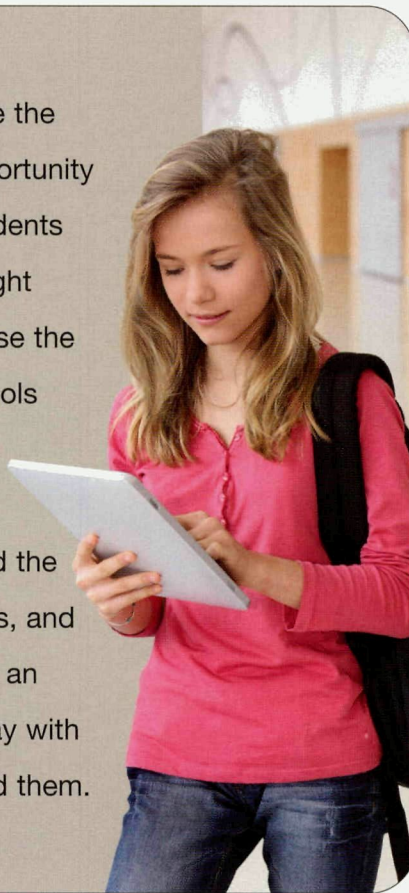
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Those examples highlight just a few of the reasons why we are ready to move forward decisively, declaring our schools as BYOD zones. However, that declaration does leave us with some work to do as more teachers realize both the opportunities and challenges of bringing student devices into the classroom. We are planning training and user groups for teachers, because the main reason teachers give for not embracing student devices is that they really don't know how to effectively integrate them. We are creating an online repository of resources addressing the topics teachers identify as barriers to help them plan for the most effective use of devices.

When someone asks why we are doing this, there can really be only one response—because it's good for kids. The naysayers are numerous. In his Stager-to-Go blog, Gary Stager claims that “BYOD is bad policy that constrains student creativity, limits learning opportunities and will lead to less support for public education in the future.” Teachers fear classroom management and tech support issues. Some claim students will use it to cheat. Others believe that technology cannot be integrated meaningfully unless all students have uniform devices. So our challenge is to turn those assumptions upside down and instead empower students to use the devices they already have with them as connections to learning.

We have the exciting opportunity to teach students to ask the right questions, use the real-world tools that they have in their hands to find the best answers, and share that in an authentic way with those around them. In the traditional model of classes going to the computer lab for technology, it becomes an add-on. With student devices, the technology becomes seamless access to information, and students can access that information whenever they need it. Their learning is linked to the content through their technology.

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There are implications for schools besides the need for a robust wireless network. With online access, our libraries are now open 24/7. To do this, we must think differently about the resources we select as our budgets are more limited. Collection management may mean learning about ebooks and reviewing the collection of databases. Access for portable devices is crucial for any resource we select. Teachers must think differently and become mentors and guides instead of purveyors of information, empowering students to ask questions and teaching them how to access information so

they can take charge of their own learning. It becomes collaborative, and students learn to produce and publish in authentic ways. One crucial part of that education is in the arena of digital citizenship and online safety, making it essential to have robust, well-designed instruction embedded throughout the curriculum.

EQUITY

That brings us to one of the main themes that arises whenever BYOD is discussed, that of digital equity. How about those students who don't have devices? Does this shut them out? Current research indicates that it does not. Nearly every report shows the same access to devices across income levels. The Speak Up surveys done by Project Tomorrow have very deliberately researched this issue, and our own informal observations echo those reports in the wide variety of schools across our district.

That has led me to a new observation and, more importantly, a re-energized passion for this project. We have the opportunity to teach all of our students to use their devices for learning. The devices in their hands and pockets have more power than many of our computers did not so long ago. There is wireless access of some sort on nearly every corner, whether in the local library, office lobby, or elsewhere.

They have the devices. They have the access. Schools must grasp that opportunity to leverage this, not just to cover curriculum but to teach how to use the power in their hands to find out what they need to know—for today and for life. This is an amazing opportunity, and one which we cannot afford to miss. Our students are waiting. ■

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